

Annual Report of the Medical Officer of Health

OF THE

CHAILEY RURAL DISTRICT COUNCIL.

Gentlemen.—I again send you my annual statement of the various matters in connection with the general health and sanitary conditions of the eleven parishes which have hitherto constituted the area of your district.

With the exception of the severe outbreak of diphtheria, which took place in the summer, no unusual amount of sickness of an infectious character has occurred.

Scarlet fever has again prevailed in seven different parishes of the district, but happily, as in previous years, was characterised by its very mild type, and again no death was registered from that cause. A larger number of cases of erysipelas than usual have been notified, but they were scattered over six different parishes and none were traceable to contagious causes.

I find the number of deaths to be eight in excess of that in the previous year, making the death-rate for the past 12 months 18 per 1,000 of the population.

On looking over the column of deaths occurring at different ages, as shown in Table A, it will be seen that the number dying in extreme infancy (under one year) is 21 as compared with 19 and 19 respectively in the two previous years. Passing to the next column, deaths between the ages of one and five years, only two are recorded, both of which happened in Ringmer. The next column, deaths between the ages of five and 15, shows the unprecedented number of ten; this is accounted for by the diphtheria epidemic at Wivelsfield, where, between those ages, six deaths occurred from this cause. The mortality in the County Asylum was 95, being three less than that of the previous year; of these eight were from phthisis, and 13 from inflammatory chest affections.

I have in the past 12 months received 64 notification certificates. This is far in excess of the usual number, the average for the past eight years being 13. Eighteen of these were for scarlet fever, one case occurring in Hamsey, five in Chailey, one in Barcombe, two in Ditchling, one in Westmeston, six in Street, and two in Chiltington. One case of typhoid fever was notified from Barcombe, and one from puerperal fever in Ringmer; 14 from erysipelas, two occurring in Chailey, two in Barcombe, two in Newick, three in Wivelsfield, three in Ringmer, and two in Ditchling; whilst 30 certificates from diphtheria were sent in, one occurring in Barcombe, one in Plumpton, three in Ringmer, three in Ditchling, one in Chailey, and 21 in Wivelsfield.

In none of these zymotic cases is there anything calling for especial notice, except those consequent on the diphtheria outbreak in Wivelsfield, which occurred in the summer of last year, when within a period of five days 17 cases were notified to me, all of which, with the exception of two adults, happened to children who had, a few days previously, attended the Wivelsfield Board School in company with a little girl from Wivelsfield Green, whom, it was afterwards found, was at the time of attending school suffering from diphtheria. This, therefore, was no doubt the starting point of the outbreak, and no time was lost in devising means by which to check its spreading. In the absence of any mode of isolation, a large tent was erected, and to which the children were at once removed, and certificated nurses engaged to attend on them.

In a report I made to the council at that time on the subject, mention was made of the very prompt and generous help that was rendered by the principal inhabitants in the neighbourhood, and without such assistance it would have been impossible to have started the experiment with the tent in the successful way it was done. Almost every need required for the accommodation and proper feeding of the little patients had been anticipated, and by the time they had reached the tent most of the essentials for immediate use were in readiness.

It is, of course, not possible to say what the termination of this sudden outbreak would have been had the children remained in their various homes; it is certain, however, that they would thus have constituted so many centres of infection for spreading the disease, and it is equally evident that the nursing advantages they received in the tent could not have been carried out at their own homes. As it was, the epidemic, as such, was practically stamped out within five days of the date that I received the notification of its appearance. I may mention that from the first accession of the epidemic every facility for the efficient treatment of the children was afforded by the district council; not the least of these being a free and gratuitous supply of antitoxin for the use of the doctors in attendance, and there is little doubt but that the lives of at least two of the children were due to the timely use of this valuable antidote.

It was a fortunate circumstance that this outbreak occurred in the summer months, for it would have been impossible to carry out the tent arrangements in severe or stormy weather. As it was the difficulties were by no means trifling or few. In the hot sunny days it was often impossible to keep the temperature within the tent below 90 degrees, whilst at night several large stoves were kept burning, and often they were not sufficient to maintain a sufficient warmth. These experiences emphasise the necessity for some permanent building to which infectious cases could at any time be taken, and I hope, e'er this, that some arrangement has been come to between the Lewes Borough Authorities and the Chailey District Council, by which in future the latter will be enabled to send infectious cases to the Isolation Hospital at Lewes.

Another matter for very serious consideration in connection with isolation is that for providing a proper smallpox isolation hospital. The necessity for taking some decisive means for isolating smallpox cases has become much more urgent now that vaccination is no longer compulsory.

I have not been able to ascertain the exact number of unvaccinated children in your district, but it is, I am sure, a very large proportion of the younger population, all of which are totally unprotected against the ravages of smallpox, and it is only a question of time as to when an outbreak of this frightful malady may visit us. It, therefore, seems desirable to be prepared for such a contingency by having in readiness a proper building for isolating such cases, and for this purpose I would suggest the erection of a corrugated iron building, situated in a more or less central part of the district, capable of accommodating from eight to twelve patients. The advantages of these iron buildings are that they are cheap, durable, easily erected, or, if necessary, removed; and no permanent staff, with the exception of a caretaker, need be employed, as nurses, when required, can be at all times obtained, and that at very short notice.

I have, as usual, made systematic inspections of those places which I considered most needed such inspection.

In my last annual report mention was made of some cottages in Wivelsfield village which were then stated to be unfit for habitation, and the owner communicated with to that effect. In January of last year further action was taken, and after some little delay the tenants of the objectionable houses had notice to quit, and since then the cottages have remained empty.

On April 20th I reported to you on the dilapidated and unhealthy state of five old houses situated in Ditchling village as being unfit for habitation. The owner, Mr. Mayston, has since had them pulled down and replaced by a block of new cottages, which, from a sanitary point of view, are all that can be desired, whilst at the same time they greatly improve the appearance of the principal street in the village.

The main sewer in connection with the Newick drainage scheme was finished early in last year, and the house drains of most of the premises within its radius are already connected with it; and as a consequence, the offensive cesspools have been abolished, thus adding greatly to the comfort and healthfulness of the place.

After the diphtheria epidemic at Wivelsfield, your Inspector and myself, on several occasions, visited the various houses where cases of this disease had occurred, and, where thought necessary, suggested means by which they might be rendered more healthy. It was found that by far the worst of these premises was the house in which the first case appeared, and which was supposed to have originated the outbreak. This cottage and the one adjoining belong to Mr. Cecil Long, of Sherrington Manor, Berwick, and are situated at Wivelsfield Green. After informing Mr. Long of their insanitary condition and the necessity for closing them, he, on the 20th of September, wrote to Mr. Walls expressing his willingness to close the houses with a view to having them pulled down; but up to the end of the year nothing had been done except giving the tenants notice to leave the houses. On last visiting the place, Jenner, one of the tenants, was still there, pleading as an excuse that he had no other house to go to.

In consequence of another 12 months in which the amount of rainfall was again deficient, the scarcity of water in most places was seriously felt, and many wells which before had never been known to fail were, at the end of the year, quite empty. Yet this deficiency in the supply of so important an element of daily life does not appear perceptibly to have affected the general health of the district.

Mr. Wells, your inspector, sends me the following report:—

"Herewith I hand you, as requested, a report on the principal sanitary matters carried out by me within the Rural Sanitary District of Chailey during the year ending December, 1898.

"Referring to my journal, I find that certificates were granted by the council for the occupation of 17 new houses in the district, viz.: Chailey 1, Barcombe 8, Ditchling 5, Hamsey 2, Newick 2, Plumpton 1, Ringmer 2, and Wivelsfield, 1. Twelve of the above-mentioned houses are supplied with water from wells of various depths, samples of which have been certified by you as sufficiently pure for drinking purposes; the remainder are supplied from the Burgess Hill water Company.

"During the year 67 samples of water have been submitted to you by me for examination, 82 of which were certified by you as pure; the remainder were condemned as unfit for drinking purposes.

"Nuisances have been abated in the parishes of Ditchling, Newick, Plumpton, Ringmer, Westmeston, and Wivelsfield.

"Two houses have been condemned as unfit for habitation. The same have been pulled down by the owner, and are now being re-built.

"Disinfectants have been distributed for all necessary cases of infection that have been brought to my notice, and I have personally disinfected by fumigation six rooms, bedding, &c., that had been occupied and used by patients suffering from infectious diseases; also two schools, viz., Westmeston and Wivelsfield; and the tent, bedding, &c., used for patients at Wivelsfield during the serious outbreak of diphtheria in that parish.

"The whole of the cowstalls occupied by persons registered under the 'Dairies and Cowstalls Order' are in a satisfactory condition."

I remain, gentlemen,

Your obedient servant,

RICHARD GRAVELY,

Medical Officer of Health.

Newick, February 17th, 1899.

